

Check for updates

RESEARCH JOURNAL **Section:** Literature, Linguistics & Criticism

Syntactic Movement Operations and Ellipsis in Nigerian English

Olohy Ejembi

PhD Candidate in English Phonology, University of Abuja

Correspondence: ej.olohiuj@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

All linguistic theories are meant to give an adequate descriptions of spoken languages. Such descriptions are not a prerogative of any variety of a given language. Descriptivist theory asserts that language should be described as it is used in a given community of speech, not as it (the language) is prescribed to be used. Hence, this paper discusses syntactic movement operations and ellipsis in Nigerian English (NE). The paper presents many examples that show the occurrences of the subjects in Nigerian English. To avoid ascribing a wrong status to errors, the study took about four years - since 2019 - before conclusions were made on the syntactic movement operations and ellipsis in Nigeria English.

Keywords: Nigerian English, ellipsis, syntactic movement, occurrences

African Journal In Advanced Arts And Humanities

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2023
ISSN: 3005-4540 (Online)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted 28 August 2023
Accepted: 10 September 2023
Published: 22 September 2023

HOW TO CITE

Ejembi, O. (2023). Syntactic movement operations and ellipsis in Nigerian English. *African Journal of Advanced Arts and Humanities*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://journals.evonexpublishers.com/index.php/AJAAH/article/view/24>



Published in Nairobi by Evonex Global, an imprint of Evonex Publishers Ltd

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Introduction

Somewhat, we cannot discuss syntactic movement and ellipsis without presenting, in summary, some linguistic theories, especially in the area of language structure. Radford says that “language is a mirror of the mind” (1). And if so, linguistic field is needed to be study and discussed so as to postulate the linguistic rules that are innate in the mind. As a mirror of the mind, language is the function of human brain, which is said to be structure-dependent. This principle of structure-dependency of language makes the study of the theory of language structure a viable one. This theory, Radford puts, “concern[s] itself with what are the defining structural properties of natural languages” (1). Furthermore, as the mirror of the mind, the structure of a language may account for how the native speakers of a language construct social relationship, especially towards non-natives. And, because language is the function of the human brain, linguists are concerned with giving a comprehensive and plausible description of the structures as they are in the brain and their outputs. In pursuing this, linguists postulate that, in many cases, some constructions undergo transformation which makes them to change structurally. According to Radford, “in order to provide a principled account of this [transformation] we need to posit...two levels of structures (S- structure and D-structure)” (401).

Deep Structure and Surface Structure

In generative/transformational grammar, deep structure (D-structure) of a linguistic expression is a theoretical construct which is the underlying syntactic structure that seeks to unify several related structures. This is a syntactic model generated by phrase-structure rules, which is an abstract representation that identifies the ways a sentence can be analyzed and interpreted.

In 1957, Chomsky identified a basic grammatical structure in Syntactic Structures that he referred to as Kernel sentences. Kernel sentences were seen as where words and meaning first appeared in the complex cognitive process that resulted in an utterance. However, in his “Aspects of the Theory of Syntax” (1965), Chomsky abandoned the notion of kernel sentences and identified the underlying constituents of sentences as deep structure. The deep structure was versatile insofar as it accounted for meaning and provided the basis for transformations that turned deep structure into surface structure, which represented what we actually hear or read. Transformation rules, therefore, connected deep structure and surface structure, meaning and syntax.

A Surface Structure (S-structure), therefore, is the version of a sentence that can be spoken and heard. Simply put, according to Crystal, “[T]he surface structure of a sentence is the final stage in the syntactic representation of a sentence, which provides the input to the phonological component of the grammar, and which thus most closely corresponds to the structure of the sentence we articulate and hear.....An alternative conception is to relate surface structure directly to a semantic level of representation” (34).

In this theoretical model, deep structures are generated by phrase-structure rules, and surface structures are derived from deep structures by series of transformations which are demonstrated greatly in the theory of syntactic movement.

Syntactic Movement

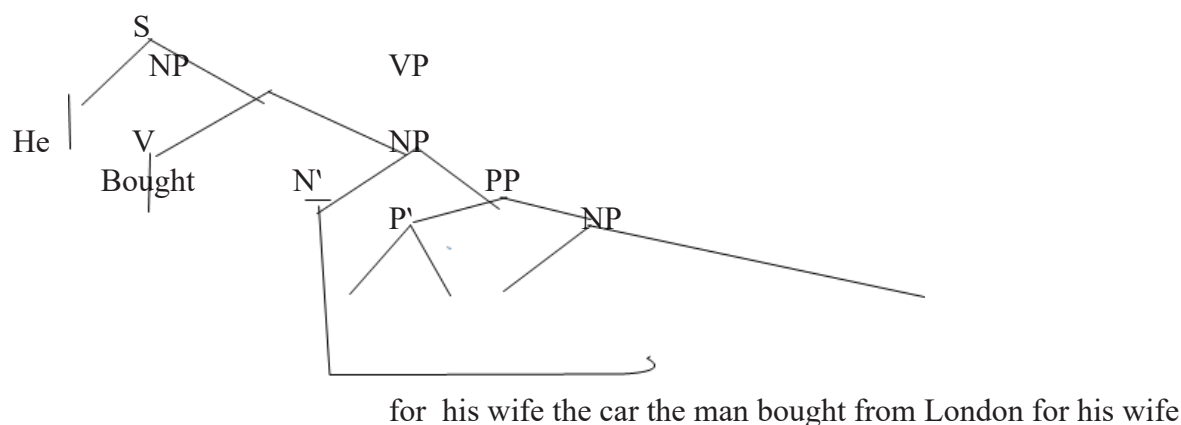
Movement in syntax has to do with transformations where a particular constituent or structure of a sentence is raised or moved from its base to another environment within the sentence. It is an operation that was introduced in transformational theories of generative grammar to characterize displacement phenomena. The long-distance dependencies formed by movement operations are of broad interest to linguistic theories; they do not only constitute one of the most distinctive properties of natural language, but also provide a window into more general architectural constraints of the language faculty. The distribution of movement operations has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of fundamental grammatical concepts, such as case, theta roles, information structure, the argument/adjunct distinction, and perhaps most notably, locality constraints on grammatical operations (Crystal, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to state further that syntactic movement is associated with transformational or derivational theories of syntax (e.g. transformational grammar, government and binding theory, minimalist program), which explains that in some sentences certain constituents appear to have been displaced from the position where they receive important features of interpretation. It is a generalised property of natural languages and essentially describes the fact that grammatical occurrences pronounced in one position are also interpreted as if they were somewhere else (Chomsky, 2002; Carnie, 2013).

Consider the sentence below:

- (1) *He bought the car the man bought from London for his wife for his wife.*
- (2) *He bought for his wife the car the man bought from London for his wife.*

In the above sentences ‘bought’ is a transitive verb that requires an object as its complement. And syntactic rules require that the head and its complement are sisters which are supposed to be contiguous structurally. However, in (2), the direct object (the underlined constituent) which is the complement of ‘bought’, as the concept of Theta roles dictates, is separated from the head - that is, it is moved to the right side of the sentence; ‘_’ indicates where the underlined constituent is moved from. It can be understood looking at (2) that movement operation can disambiguate sentences as (1) is too clumsy. Let us further illustrate the example using tree diagrams:



Movement operates on two broad rules: Adjunction and substitution rules. Substitution rules are concerned primarily with movement to the left, while adjunction rules are more about movement to the right. There are many movement operations in syntax which includes:

- (i) V movement
- (ii) Passive (NP) movement
- (iii) Raising (subject-subject raising)
- (iv) Subject Auxiliary inversion(Aux movement)
- (v) Wh-movement
- (vi) Adverbial movement

The Nigerian Variety of English

Kachru quotes Achebe who said that: “If you ask (me) ‘can (the African child) ever learn to use (English) like a native speaker?’ I should say I hope not: it is neither necessary nor desirable for him to do so. I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English still in communion with ancestral home but altered to suit the new African surroundings” (11). This quote justifies Holmes who says that “local varieties of English, with distinctive linguistic features have developed in many...countries” (78), which of course Nigerian English (NE) is one of them. Many researches have been done by scholars and research students on NE usage in various language fields and are documented, which provide vivid descriptions of the variety (see Olohy (2022 & 2016), Jowitt (2018 & 1991), Banjo (1995), Adesina (2011), etc.). Therefore, it is not out of place to say that generally Nigerian English (NE) exists,

and it is a unique variety in its right. It is the variety used amongst educated Nigerians. Thus Jowitt quotes Walsh to say that

.... it is suggested that the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians no matter what their first language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English (30)

These features that are common to mark off a general type are what many researchers on Nigerian English set out to describe and explain. This paper describes the Nigerian English Syntactic Movement Operations and Ellipses.

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is the most common research design in linguistic field. It is one that is never overemphasized in researches concerned with second language usage. Seliger and Shohamy posit that “qualitative research is a useful approach wherever an investigator is concerned with discovering or describing second language acquisition in its natural state or context” (24). Hence, it is very important in describing peculiar linguistic usages and the interference or transfer of linguistic elements from one language into another. It aims to collect data or describe things in a non-numerical way.

The methodology used to generate the issues in this paper involved a close reading of Nigerian dailies (newspapers), online media publications, broadcast news, televised conversations, and observations of face-to-face conversations among educated Nigerians. The researcher noticed the forms of the Syntactic Movement Operations in the constructions of Nigerian users of English in 2019, and, since then, began the study by reading newspapers and other media publications online, and the observations of conversations. This paper, therefore, adopts the hermeneutic/interpretivist philosophy by using descriptivist approach to linguistic studies. This involves the interpretation and discussion of the finding(s) based on an underlying theory of descriptivism – that is, the description of the linguistic usage in a given community of speech (Nigeria), North-central Nigeria in particular. Hence, the paper discusses the findings without any structured quantitative analysis of the data, because the researcher did not follow any structured research design for the study.

Syntactic Movement in Nigerian English (NE)

This section focuses on the discussion of what the writer of this paper has been observing among Nigerian users of English in the area of Syntactic Movement. For the number of movement operations and ellipses that will be presented here, only the common occurrences found among Nigerian users of English will be given. It should be understood that what we are going to present in this section is not an absolute generalization.

Subject-Auxiliary Inversion

This theoretical construct demonstrates the relationship between declarative and interrogative constructions. It is one of the substitution movement operations which are the most noticeable to be hardly employed in constructions of Nigerian users of English. Brown and Miller puts that subject-auxiliary inversion involves placing the subject after a finite auxiliary verb, rather than before it as in the case in typical declarative sentences (129). In other words it is the movement of an auxiliary verb to the position in front of the subject of the main clause. This movement is mostly used to construct “yes” or “no”.

(1a) *Is he one of our lecturers?*

(2a) *Are they here right now?*

(3a) *Will he leave tomorrow?*

(4a) *Have you eaten today?*

It is common for the above questions to be expressed in their deep structural form in NE. In this case, the sentences are expressed as questions by the use intonation:

(1b) *He is one of our lecturers?*

(2b) *They are here right now?*

(3b) *He will leave tomorrow?*

(4b) *You have eaten today?*

This is probably due to the fact that Nigerian languages are tonal, hence, tone, thereto, takes prominent in this area. Tag questions are conspicuously absent in Nigerian English, and this is due to the fact that subject-auxiliary inversion does not occur frequently in the speech of Nigerian users of English.

Passive NP movement

Active and passive sentences have close relationship. Consider the following sentences:

(1a) *Prof Azi has donated #5 million.*

(1b) *#5 million has been donated by prof. Azi.*

The verb groups in the sentences are the same in tense and aspect, but differ in voice. But in any case, both are semantically and syntactically identical. However, there is certain transformation operation that takes place, resulting in the substitution of the subject NP with the object NP. Hence, Aarts says that “in order to capture the...affinities between active and passive sentences we might view passive sentences as being the result of movement” (149). Therefore, the (b) sentence above is schematically represented as (2) below:

(2) *#5 million has been donated _ by prof. Azi.*

The ‘_’ indicates the position where the subject of (b) is derived from. It, therefore, means that it is the transformation of (1a) that becomes (1b) as demonstrated in (2). This occurs in most cases where the agent of an action is not known, the sentence is put in passive voice.

(1a) *A car was stolen from here yesterday.*

(2a) *A man was killed on this street last week.*

(3a) *The dish has been broken.*

However, it is typical among many Nigerian users of English to employ an implicit ‘they’ in order to convey the above sentences:

(1b) *They stole a car from here yesterday.*

(2b) *They killed a man on this street last week.*

(3b) *They have broken the dish.*

The following examples are common when talking about academic activities in Nigerian:

(4a) *They have started/commenced lectures.* Instead of

(4b) *Lectures have commenced.*

(5a) *They will soon start exams.* Instead of

(5b) *Exams will soon start/commence.*

In another case, where the agent is known and it is obligatory to state the agent in the sentence, but better if expressed with by-phrase, most Nigerian users of English would either express it employing cleft sentence or pseudo-cleft sentence. That is, in response to the question “Who broke the dish?”, for example, instead of saying

(6a) *The dish was broken by Jem.*

It mostly occurs in NE as

(6b) *It was Jem who broke the dish.* Or

(7) *Jem was the one who broke the dish.*

Furthermore, instead of saying the following:

(8a) *I told him the answer.*

(9a) *Leejay gave it to him.*

(10a) *He brought it.*

NE puts them as

(8b) *It was I (me) who told him the answer.*

(9b) *It was Leejay who gave it to her.*

(10b) *It was he who brought it.*

Extraposition

Extraposition operates on postponement or adjunction rules which, according to Brown and Miller, “transport a constituent to the right of the sentence”(358). Extraposition “takes a constituent, typically from subject position, and move it to a position after the verb, leaving a dummy ‘it’ subject behind” (358).

(1a) *she sold _ at the market the basket that she had made.*

However, in most cases Nigerian users of English hardly postpone structures, thereby creating ambiguity or clumsiness in many sentences. Many Nigerian users of English are likely to put the above sentence as:

(1b) *She sold the basket that she (had) made at the market.*

Though (1b) shows the deep structure of the sentence, while (1a) shows the surface structure, however the expression in (1b) is ambiguous. One could think that, “the basket” was made in the market. To disambiguate the above expression, many Nigerian users of English are likely to expand the extraposed clause to a fully fledged sentence.

(1c) *she sold the basket at the market; the basket that she (had) made.*

The above is corroborated by the example below:

(2a) *Nansik lost _ on Monday the book I gave to her.*

NE renders it in its kernel form as:

(2b) *Nansik lost the book I gave to her on Monday.*

Or disambiguate the sentence in the following:

(2c) *The book I gave to Nansik; she lost it on Monday.*

Hence, in many cases, Nigerian users of English disambiguate heavy NP within a sentence by changing it to a relative clause or sentence instead of extraposing or postponing the NP. Therefore, instead of

(3a) *A man appeared at the door with hat on his head.*

Nigerian users of English are likely to say

(3b) *A man wearing a hat on his head appeared at the door.*

That is why, in NE, it’s common for speakers to say

(4a) *The guy that has marks in his face came looking for you.*
than

(4b) *The guy with marks in his face came looking for you.*

However, it is common in NE to postponed time adverbial in sentences. Consider the following examples:

(5a) *They convicted him _ for stealing a car in October 2021.*

(6a) *She got married _ before we graduated in 2009.*

(7a) *He left the country _ after our Youth Service in 2014.*

Unless one has background knowledge of the information in the sentences above, the underlined adverbials could be misleading. The information in (5a) forced the visitor to the prison to ask the informant: “When was he convicted then?” The visitor thought that the underlined date modified the contiguous subordinate clause. (6a) and (7a) were taken from a group chat for Class of 2010. One would think that the dates of graduation were 2009 and 2014 respectively. The above examples clearly indicate that this kind of syntactic movement create ambiguity, whereas movement operations are supposed to disambiguate sentence. This form of movement (postponed adverbial) occurs frequently in NE.

Topicalization

Due to duplication or repetition, topicalization or preposing of NP is mostly rendered redundant by many Nigerian users of English. That is, the topicalised or preposed constructions are usually repeated in sentences. Sentences like

(1a) *University of Abuja I like, but Nasarawa state University I don’t like.*

(2a) *Syntax I hate, but semantics I like.*

(3a) *Football I love, but movies I don't like.*

are commonly rendered by many Nigerian users of English as

(1b) *University of Abuja, I like university of Abuja, but Nasarawa state university I don't like it.*

(2b) *Syntax, I hate it, but semantics I like semantics.*

(3b) *Football, I love football, but movies I don't like movies.*

In these sentences (1b-3b) the topicalized structures are duplicated; and as said above, the duplications make them redundant. In fact, the structural relationship between the preposed structures and the structures that follow them is strained because they function as disjuncts in the sentences.

This form of repetition or duplication is found elsewhere in Nigerian English.

- *Children nowadays, they don't like to study hard.*
- *Our National players, they are not playing well as before.*
- *My daughter, Ifeoma, she is not behaving well at all.*
- *Corruption in Nigeria today, to be sincere, it is unprecedented.*

The constructions of this type create extra grammatical or hyper-emphatic elements that render them informal.

Ellipsis in Nigerian English (NE)

The word ellipsis comes from the Greek word *éllipsis*, which means “omission” or “falling short.” But ellipsis as syntactic theory indicates that in many cases people make grammatically incomplete sentences. That in fact some could make sentences that are not only grammatically incomplete, but also semantically incomplete. In such cases sentences can only be understood in reference to their context. This happens mostly where constituents have been elided. Therefore, ellipsis, according to Burton-Roberts, is “the omission from sentences obligatory elements capable of being understood in the context of use” (96).

(1a) *He asked the class what his name was.*

(1b) *He asked what his name was.*

In the (b) sentence the object NP in the (a) sentence is elided/omitted. Subject also can be ellipited as in (2b) below:

(2a) *I came to see your boss.*

(2b) *Travelled to Akpodo this morning.*

From the context it is certain that the ellipited subject is the boss. But, according to Burton-Robert, that “the utterance of (2b) is acceptable in certain contexts, [does not mean] subject NPs are grammatically optional.

VP constituents also can be ellipited as in (3) and (4) below:

(3) *Attah does pay his bills every month, but Ochoga doesn't.*

(4) *He travelled to Akpodo on Wednesday, but the wife on Friday.*

Ellipsis is an important concept in syntactic analysis, because it is one of the effective tools for constituency test for determining the parts of a sentence that share the same constituent either as NP, VP, complement or adjunct. And there are many widely acknowledged types of ellipsis such as gapping, stripping, VP-ellipsis, pseudo-gapping, answer fragments, N-ellipsis, comparative deletion, etc. There is no unanimity among experts that all of the above listed types should qualify as ellipsis.

However, ellipses do not occur frequently in the speech of many Nigerian users of English.

Consider the following Np Ellipsis:

(5a) *I went to his house, but couldn't talk to him.*

(6a) *I was just holding my pen not knowing what to write down during test.*

(7a) *The man was arraigned, but acquitted for lack of evidence.*

Many Nigerian users of English repeat the subject in the second clause:

(5b) *I went to his house, but I couldn't talk to him*

(6b) *I was just holding my pen (because) I didn't know what to write down during test.*

(7b) *The man was arraigned, but he was acquitted for lack of evidence.*

In fact, my daughter, a 300 level student in the University of Jos, who was helping in typing this work inserted subject in the second clause of (5a) and (7a) thinking the absence of subject in them was a mistake.

Other examples on NP ellipsis:

(8a) *The people of Lagos State love our party, and they are ready to vote for us en masse.*

(9a) *The Presidential Petition Tribunal has rejected the plea by PDP, and it will give its verdict on the main matter on 26th of May.*

(10a) *His father will be king until his death, and then, he will take over the kingship.*

These examples above further show that NE hardly elides subject NP; (10a), however, is an object NP. Where ellipsis occurs frequently in utterances, the underlined NPs in the second clause of (8a), (9a) and (10a) would be elided as in (8b), (9b) and (10b) below:

(8b) *The people of Lagos State love our party, and are ready to vote for us en masse.*

(9b) *The Presidential Petition Tribunal has rejected the plea by PDP, and it will give its verdict on the main matter on 26th of May.*

(10b) *His father will be king until his death, and then, he will take over.*

VP ellipsis also misery occurs in NE.

(11a) *She wants me to go out with her, but I don't want to.*

(12a) *Ori, my friend, will travel for the holidays, but I won't.*

Nigerian users of English repeat the VP as in

(11b) *She wants me to go out with her, but I don't want to go out with her.*

(12b) *Ori, my friend, will travel for the holidays, but I won't travel for the holidays.*

The absence of ellipsis is much more common in responses to questions.

Question: "Who will and who won't travel for the holidays?"

(13a) *Ori, my friend, will, but I won't.*

But it commonly occurs in NE as

(13b) *Ori, my friend, will travel for the holidays, but I won't travel for the holidays.*

These examples and other observations we made on colloquial conversations, which are not presented here, show that elliptical sentences are not popular among many Nigerian users of English.

Conclusion

It must be admitted here that it is not everything about movement operations and ellipsis that is discussed in this paper. And it is not true that what is being said about Nigerian English is exhaustive. There are more to be studied and said about the whole subject. However, in the speech of most Nigerian users of English movement operations and ellipses of the kinds discussed here hardly occur. Instead of moving constituents to disambiguate constructions, they could resort to explaining the constructions using other words or sentences. We also said that Nigerian users of English often use intonation (tone) to ask questions than inverting subject and auxiliary for such function, and, for this reason, tag questions are hardly heard in their speech. Wherefore, it is said that this could be the result of Nigerian languages being tonal. This last statement needs more investigation to ascertain if the assumption is true - that is, to investigate further on whether or not the reason they often use intonation for questions is because their native languages are tonal. Be that as it may, here again, Nigerian English manifests itself in syntax. As Olohy (2019) argued, researches have shown that the variety is enough to be used as a pedagogical model in its context. Although we cannot say confidently here that there are enough available researches on the area of semantics, but researches in phonology and syntax of Nigerian English abound, which have demonstrated peculiarities that display the variety as a unique one.

References

- Aarts, Bas (2001). *English Syntax and Argumentation*. New York: Palgrave.
- Brown, Keith and Miller, Jim (1991). *Syntax: A Linguistic Introduction to Sentence Structure*. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge.
- Burton-Robert, Noel (2011). *Analysing Sentences: An introduction to English Syntax*. Great Britain: Pearson.
- Carnie, A. (2010) *Constituent Structure*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
- Carnie, A. (2013). *Syntax: A generative introduction* . 3rd edition. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Chomsky, Noam (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague/Paris: Mouton; ISBN 9783110172799.
- Chomsky, Noam (1965) *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press; ISBN 9780262260503.
- Crystal, David (2011). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 6th ed. Wiley.
- Jowitt, David (1991). *Nigerian English Usage: An Introduction*. Nigeria: Lsongman. Print.
- Kachru, B. B. (1992) *Model for Non-Native English*. In Kachru, B. B. (ed.), *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Olohy, Ejembi (2019). *Towards a Functional Pedagogical Approach to Language: A Critical Argument*. International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideals in Education Vol. 5.6: 1-7.
- Radford, A. (1988). *Transformational Grammar: A first course*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Seliger, Hebert and Shohamy Elana (1989). *Second Language Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.